Bavarian Soldiers in Greece, 1832-1862

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After the long fight for freedom against the Ottoman Empire, in which King Ludwig I of Bavaria distinguished himself as an important non-material and material supporter, Greece obtained, in 1830, its independence from Turkish rule and was declared to be an independent sovereign kingdom.

Two years later, on May 7, 1832, Great Britain, France and Russia, the "protecting powers" of Greece, entered into an official state treaty with Bavaria after difficult negotiations in London, which was to transfer the power to govern Greece, combined with the royal title, to the Bavarian Prince Otto. King Ludwig I, in his capacity as guardian, accepted the election for his second-born son, who was not yet of age. Until the prince reached majority of age (June 1, 1835), his sovereign rights in Greece were exercised by a so-called regency, which was made up of three councils, to be appointed by the Bavarian king.

Departure of the Bavarian Auxiliary Corps

Among the requirements of the three guaranteeing powers of the Greek independence for the transfer of control to Otto of Bavaria was the provision of a separate military force made up of at least 3500 men, for which volunteers who originated from the entire German-speaking world were hurriedly recruited in Bavaria. They were supposed to replace the Great British, French and Russian units that were, at that time, still deployed in Greece. However, because it was impossible to establish the stipulated "Greek" army in the short period of time leading up to the intended commencement of Bavarian rule (Otto set forth at the end of 1832), King Ludwig I of Bavaria helped out by assembling an auxiliary corps from regular Bavarian troops. This was supposed to be a replacement for Otto's own armed forces, and, accordingly, return to the homeland once that force had been completely established and arrived in Greece. This auxiliary corps, which had the contractually specified number of men, was made up of the first battalions of the 6th and 10th and the second battalions of the 11th and 12th infantry regiments, as well as a squadron from each of the 3rd and 4th *chevau-légers* regiments. It was supported by the 9th company of the 1st artillery regiment, and started for Greece in November 1832. The units which had gathered in Munich because of geographical proximity travelled over Benediktbeuern, the Walchensee, Mittenwald and Seefeld to Innsbruck, where they joined the units from the Pfalz and Bavarian Swabia that had taken a more western route. They then, together in a group, reached Trieste shortly before Christmas

via the Brenner Pass, the Puster Valley, the Drava Valley, the Wurzen Pass and passing by Laibach (Ljubljana). After a short rest period, the troops were ferried from Piran to Greece on 35 vessels at the beginning of January 1833. The units under the command of Major General Friedrich Freiherr von Hertling were underway for three months all in all before they finally trod upon Greek soil at Nafplio.

King Otto followed the soldiers a month later and arrived in the then (first) Greek capital city, Nafplio.

The first "royal Greek" soldiers, that is, troops who had been recruited for the Greek army, had already travelled with the "royal Bavarian" troops to Hellas. Their uniform was inspired by the Bavarian uniform in design and colour. The headgear, however, did not follow this model. The soldiers wore *shakos* instead of the typical *Raupenhelm* and, in the emblem, the "L" for Ludwig was replaced by an "O" for Otto, so that it was possible to unambiguously differentiate between membership of the respective forces.

Mood among the Bavarian Soldiers

Various contemporary Bavarian folk songs tell of enthusiasm for these events and the sympathy of the broad population. In these songs, the political importance of the mission, but also the expectations, hopes and fears of the departing soldiers are addressed.

"Revive, you Bavarians, light-hearted,
the day of departure is here,
we ship joyfully and without complaint
over there across that sea
into ancient Attica...

One Otto departs with us,
the king's dear son.
In Greece we will ground,
we Bavarians will ground for ever and ever
Bavaria's high throne"

reads, for example, one of the songs.[3] But not all of the songs portray the journey as a joyful occurrence like the quoted example. Some lament the parting from loved ones back at home and express concern about the dangers lurking in a foreign land:

“Alas how fate has struck me,
that it grieves me so!
I must go away to the Greek army,
must spill human blood.

I only act according to my duty,
only follow orders too,
and the Turkish army so fiercely pursues
my swift life.”

Ludwig Köllnberger

We are especially informed about the everyday life of the soldiers in their temporary/new home land, about their experiences of the country and people, through diaries, letters, and memoirs from their hand, but also through reports from official military authorities. A particularly impressive source amongst the quite extensive heritage of “ego documents” from this period is a collection of 102 watercolours, which the soldier Ludwig Köllnberger produced during his stay in Hellas. Köllnberger came to Greece as part of the Bavarian auxiliary brigade, transferred to the Greek service in 1833 and, disenchanted, requested reintegration in the Bavarian army confederation in 1838. He painted not only Greek landscapes with preserved ancient monuments and villages that had been destroyed in the turmoil of the struggle for freedom, but also depicted chiefly the everyday lives of the soldiers and, at the same time, everyday Greek life in his sketches. In this respect, the pictures are of outstanding cultural-historical importance. Simultaneously, they should be classified as a unique pictorial repository for Greece in the first half of the 19th century.

The Soldiers' Accommodation and Meals

The accommodation and provisioning of the soldiers, naturally, loomed large in all descriptions. Köllnberger's billet in Lepanto, which was spacious and clean, and had a proper bed and facilities for hanging up clothes, did not constitute the norm. The complaint that not enough barracks were available and that the soldiers could therefore only provisionally be accommodated in barracks, which, moreover, were often very dirty, is repeatedly to be found in accounts. The available quarters were, in turn, often nearly uninhabitable because of their bad condition. Anton Pappus Freiherr von Tratzberg, senior lieutenant in the royal Bavarian c*hevau-légers* regiment “King”, describes such a case in his diary: “The squadron moved into the local cavalry barracks in Argos. These barracks […] were, however, in the worst state.

They had just been left thus by the French troops and handed over almost uninhabitable. It was not just that neither windows nor doors were to be found, but rather even the floors seemed to have been […] wilfully perforated".

The provisioning of the troops was, as a rule, simple, usually monotonous, and was above all made up of local foodstuffs like sheep meat and barley products. Because many foodstuffs spoiled quickly due to the heat, the transport of fresh goods over great distances was difficult, if not even impossible.

Deployment of the Bavarian Soldiers

Soldierly tasks take up considerable space in the texts. These included patrols, border control, and exploratory journeys into the hinterland, on which it was not rare for the soldiers to be attacked by bandits or whole bands of the same. It is not a coincidence that Köllnberger devotes several of his watercolours to this theme. Internally torn, shaped by lengthy oppression that yielded the most varied forms of resistance, disillusioned by the reforms, which were only slowly getting under way, the dissatisfaction in the population was focussed against the regency, later the king himself, and, naturally, against the royal army as a representative of this state.

Social Life

In comparison to this, the social obligations of the troops, for example participation in parades or in embassy trips to the Turkish area - which, for a Bavarian soldier, who up until then may hardly ever have trod on foreign soil, represented immersion in a completely foreign world - may have been less strenuous. Such political missions, which normally led to agreements, such as border settlements etc., were open only to a few high ranks. A trip held in 1834 and sketched by Köllnberger went to Larissa and culminated in a reception from the pasha and a military parade of Turkish units.

However, it was also possible to locally explore the at first foreign-seeming life in a less spectacular manner and thereby bring variety, and simultaneously entertainment, to the strict everyday life of the soldier.

One could enjoy oneself excellently on strolls through the streets and during visits to coffee houses. Adalbert Marc enthuses in his memoirs of Greece: "There, one saw Nafplio's whole beautiful world taking a stroll in their so wonderful national costumes, it was a colourful disarray […] Around eight o'clock one sat on the streets in front of the coffee houses and ate the splendid ice cream for a low price". The colourful traditional dress, with its abundant pleating and turban-like coiled cloths as a headdress, was very fascinating. Köllnberger, too, devoted a number of his watercolours to this subject.

Officers found a change at evening parties, balls and concerts. The court ball, annually held in Nafplio in celebration of King Otto's landing in Greece, was of particular social importance. In order to create a countrywide internal connection with the royal house, corresponding festivities took place in parallel in additional places in Greece. Johann Kayser participated in the ball in Modon and describes the celebration in his memoirs as follows: “To celebrate the glorification of the day, a ball was arranged, in which all the officers of the garrison, the k[ingly] officials and esteemed citizens of the city took part. A large barracks hall had been prepared for this purpose, and credit to the Greeks who undertook the preparations – the hall was beautifully and tastefully adorned!” (BayHStA HS 777, p. 229). Functions of this sort also always provided the opportunity to witness unknown and foreign customs or practices, which were not always commented on in a friendly or flattering manner: “I was even more surprised when I saw that here, at a court ball, Greek women let the small children they had brought along drink from their breast in front of all those present, openly and without shyness” (ibid., p. 230).

Perception of National Customs

Music and dance are often discussed in the reports of the soldiers; two forms of entertainment that present themselves completely differently from the familiar ones. Although the Bavarians were very interested, they lacked deeper appreciation of that which they heard and saw. The harmonies and movements were too alien. Correspondingly, the descriptions often convey more than surprise. Frequently, the music and dance of the Greeks were thought of with biting ridicule, as in the case of Johann Kayser, who describes what he experienced at the court ball in Modon as follows: “Two Greeks, with crossed legs as per the Eastern custom, sat on cushions on a table and played their off-tune violins dreadfully […]. Their singing, which sounded like jackals howling far off in the woods, was, however, much worse than the zither players” (BayHStA HS 777, p. 229). Nevertheless, provided they had the opportunity, the soldiers leaped at these small pleasures, which represented a welcome change from their harsh and uncomfortable everyday life.

It is interesting that the soldiers – at least, one can gather this from the surviving reports – were, on the one hand, fascinated by the new and unknown things they saw and experienced, yet on the other hand also clearly unsettled, indeed, in part, even disgusted. It was not rare for them to respond to the Greeks with unconcealed arrogance, as though the world they lived in in Bavaria lacked problems of any kind.

Return of the Soldiers to Bavaria

The members of the Bavarian auxiliary brigade returned to Bavaria in the years 1834 and 1835. The “Greek” troops, which had, in the meantime, been recruited and shipped to Greece, now took over their duties. With this, the mission of the Bavarian units was brought to an end. Some of the soldiers voluntarily transferred to the Greek service in the hopes of a good livelihood, if not of opportunities for advancement; however, the majority was glad to be able to set out for home. Militant uprisings in the country, the battles against groups of bandits that would not end, and, above all, illnesses caused by the unfamiliar climate, drastically decimated the number of returnees. Added this was the failure to provide the auxiliary corps with enough field hospitals and healthcare professionals. The mortality was, accordingly, stupendously high. Of the 424 dead from the auxiliary corps, only twelve died from external causes. Incidentally, a commemorative monument in the form of a sleeping Bavarian lion was erected in Nafplio in 1841 for the dead from the Bavarian auxiliary corps.

Amongst the recruited volunteers, considerably more soldiers lost their lives in the subsequent years. A number of them also stayed in Greece permanently and started families there, with the result that less than half of the around 5000 soldiers returned to Bavaria. One of them was Ludwig Köllnberger, who, in 1838, requested reintegration in the Bavarian army as a “re-engaged corporal and cadet” after a quite respectable career in the Greek army. Although the revolution of 1843 had already caused the majority of the Bavarians to return, the “Greece” adventure was over (for the soldiers, too) at the latest in 1863, when the royal couple went into exile.

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